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## Bully, bullies and bullying: Pejorative terminology, alternative descriptors, and ethics-based interventions

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# *Bully, Bullies and Bullying: Pejorative Terminology, Alternative Descriptions, & Ethics-Based Interventions*

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University of Georgia

# Problems of Definition

We judge a behavior as normal or abnormal through our subjective cultural norms, rules, and expectations. Therefore, defining Serious Emotional Disturbance (SED), i.e., Emotional or Behavioral Disorders (EBD), or any disability category is difficult for various reasons

Examples of these difficulties (Kauffman, 2009):

- *Differences in conceptual models*
- *Differing purposes of definition*
- *The complexities of measuring emotions and behavior*
- *The range and variability of normal and deviant behavior*
- *The disadvantages inherent in labeling deviance.*

**The terminology we use to describe clusters of behaviors and conditions changes over time due to:**

- Advancements in science/assessment leading to better differentiated identification/diagnoses
- The development of pejorative connotations that occur over time

# Historical Terms for Intellectual Disabilities

- *Idiot* - 1250-1300: Middle English < Latin, *idiot*a; layman, person lacking skill
- *Amentia* - 1350-1400: Middle English < Latin, *ament*; out of one's mind
- *Feeble-minded* - 1525-35: idle English < Old French; lacking normal mental powers
- *Imbecile* - 1540-50: Latin, *imbecillus*; weak
- *Simpleton* - 1640-50: Dolt, fool
- *Cretin* - 1770-80: French, *creitin*; “Christian”
- *Mongoloid* - 1865-70: Anthropological classification, archaic, Down Syndrome
- *Moron* - 1905-10: Greek, foolish

# Actual Diagnostic Terms

*Moron* (IQ of 51–70)

*Imbecile* (IQ of 26–50)

*Idiot* (IQ of  $\leq$  25)

# Historical Terms for Intellectual Disabilities

- *Mental Retardation*, 20<sup>th</sup> Century, found in PL 94-142, aka IDEA
- *Retardate*, one who is *Mentally Retarded*, typical usage in 1950's – 1970's
- Individual with *Mental Retardation*, emphasis on Person 1<sup>st</sup> language, CEC, 1980's
- *Intellectual Disability*, World Health Organization, 2011, US Department Of Education, 2013 (Rosa's Law)

THE TERMINOLOGY WE USE TO DESCRIBE  
INDIVIDUALS WITH CHALLENGES IS  
GENERALLY WELL INTENTIONED BUT  
FRAUGHT WITH INACCURACIES AND  
SELF-FULFILLING PEJORATIVE EFFECTS



# **Social Maladjustment: Issues of Validity & Ramifications**

The Federal definition of SED excludes children who are socially maladjusted, unless they also have an emotional disturbance

## **IDEA - FEDERAL DEFINITION (Serious) Emotional Disturbance**

(4) Emotional disturbance is defined as follows:

(i) The term means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance:

(A) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.

(B) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.

(C) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.

(D) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.

(E) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

(ii) The term includes schizophrenia. The term does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance.

# DSM-5

## The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

American Psychiatric Association, 2013

- Diagnostic system distinct from the US DOE definitions related to P-12 educational services under PL 94-142 and IDEA
- Has some overlap relevant to IDEA definitions
- Requires impairment in Social, Educational and/or Vocational functioning

## Conduct Disorder (DSM 5)

### Criteria:

A. A repetitive and persistent pattern of behavior in which the basic rights of others or major age-appropriate societal norms or rules are violated, as manifested by the presence of at least three of the following 15 criteria in the past 12 months from any of the categories below, with at least one criterion present in the past 6 months:

### Aggression to people and animals

- (1) often bullies, threatens, or intimidates others
- (2) often initiates physical fights
- (3) has used a weapon that can cause serious physical harm to others (e.g., a bat, brick, broken bottle, knife, gun)
- (4) has been physically cruel to people
- (5) has been physically cruel to animals
- (6) has stolen while confronting a victim (e.g., mugging, purse snatching, extortion, armed robbery)
- (7) has forced someone into sexual activity

## **Destruction of property**

(8) has **deliberately** engaged in fire setting with the intention of causing serious damage

(9) has deliberately destroyed others' property (other than by fire setting)

## **Deceitfulness or theft**

(10) has broken into someone else's house, building, or car

(11) often lies to obtain goods or favors or to avoid obligations (i.e., "cons" others)

(12) has stolen items of nontrivial value without confronting a victim (e.g., shoplifting, but without breaking and entering; forgery)

## **Serious violations of rules**

(13) often stays out at night despite parental prohibitions, beginning before age 13 years

(14) has run away from home overnight at least twice while living in parental or parental surrogate home, or once without returning for a lengthy period

(15) is often truant from school, beginning before age 13 years

B. The disturbance in behavior causes clinically significant impairment in social, academic, or occupational functioning.

C. If the individual is age 18 years or older, (CD diagnosis given only if) criteria are not met for antisocial personality disorder.

*Specify* type based on age at onset:

**Childhood-Onset Type:** Individuals show at least one symptom characteristic of Conduct Disorder prior to age 10 years

**Adolescent-Onset Type:** Individuals show no symptom characteristic of Conduct Disorder prior to age 10 years

**Unspecified onset:** Criteria for a diagnosis of conduct disorder are met, but there is not enough information available to determine whether the onset of the first symptom was before or after age 10 years

# Diagnostic Criteria for Oppositional Defiant Disorder DSM-5

A pattern of negativistic, hostile, and defiant behavior lasting at least 6 months, during which four (or more) of the following are present:

- (1) often loses temper
- (2) often argues with adults
- (3) often actively defies or refuses to comply with adults' requests or rules
- (4) often deliberately annoys people
- (5) often blames others for his or her mistakes or misbehavior
- (6) is often touchy or easily annoyed by others
- (7) is often angry and resentful
- (8) is often spiteful or vindictive

**Note:** Consider a criterion met only if the behavior occurs more frequently than is typically observed in individuals of comparable age and developmental level.

B. The disturbance in behavior causes clinically significant impairment in social, academic, or occupational functioning.

C. The behaviors do not occur exclusively during the course of a Psychotic or Mood Disorder.

D. Criteria are not met for Conduct Disorder, and, if the individual is age 18 years or older, criteria are not met for Antisocial Personality Disorder.



## Antisocial Personality Disorder: DSM 5

- A. There is a pervasive pattern of disregard for and violation of the rights of others occurring since age 15 years, as indicated by three (or more):
- (1) failure to conform to social norms with respect to lawful behaviors as indicated by repeatedly performing acts that are grounds for arrest
  - (2) deceitfulness, as indicated by repeated lying, use of aliases, or conning others for personal profit or pleasure
  - (3) impulsivity or failure to plan ahead
  - (4) irritability and aggressiveness, as indicated by repeated physical fights or assaults
  - (5) **reckless disregard** for safety of self or others
  - (6) consistent irresponsibility, as indicated by repeated failure to sustain consistent work behavior or honor financial obligations
  - (7) **lack of remorse**, as indicated by being indifferent to or rationalizing having hurt, mistreated, or stolen from another
- B. The individual is at least age 18 years.
- C. There is evidence of Conduct Disorder with onset before age 15 years.
- D. The occurrence of antisocial behavior is not exclusively during the course of Schizophrenia or a Manic Episode.

# **Debunking “Social Maladjustment”**



Consider the condition:

## **“Communicatio Dysfunction”**

**“A dysfunction in communication caused by sensory impairment that limits or precludes one’s ability to discriminate the occurrence of others’ presentation of interpersonal stimuli intended to elicit social interaction, where such stimuli include eye-contact, proximity, touch, topography of posture, and verbal (speech and tone-of-voice) and nonverbal (gestures, signs) behavior.”**

**Etiology:** Presumed process deficits in the reticular formation

**Treatment Regimen:** Stimulants and reinforcement of attention to interpersonal stimuli

*The tendency has always been strong to believe that whatever receives a name must be an entity or being, having an independent existence of its own. And if no real entity answering to the name could be found, men did not for that reason suppose that more existed, but imagined that it was something particularly abstruse and mysterious.*

John Stuart Mill

*Whenever we have made a word... to denote a certain group of phenomena, we are prone to suppose a substantive entity beyond the phenomena.*

William James (1890)

**THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS  
COMMUNICATIO DYSFUNTION**

# **Social Maladjustment: Issues of Validity & Ramifications**

The Federal definition of SED excludes children who are socially maladjusted, unless they also have an emotional disturbance

## **IDEA - FEDERAL DEFINITION (Serious) Emotional Disturbance**

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(ii) The term includes schizophrenia. The term does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance.

# Social Maladjustment - Historical Perspectives & Construct Validity

- Federal definition of SED was based on Eli Bower's work (1960) in California (Bower, 1981; Bower, 1982)
- “While the social maladjustment exclusion has historically been justified citing language first proposed by Bower in 1982 (*1960*), he later asserted that the term's inclusion in the federal definition was inconsistent with his original work, which ironically defined the emotionally disturbed child as “socially maladjusted in school” (p. 58).”  
Olympia, Farley, Christiansen, Pettersson, Jenson, and Clark, 2004, p. 836.
- The SM clause was never part of Bower's original definition, and he in fact did not support its addition (Bower, 1982).

# Social Maladjustment - Historical Perspectives & Construct Validity

“Bower's original definition does not include the final clause found in part (i)"...which adversely affects educational performance." Nor does he include the statements regarding children who are schizophrenic or socially maladjusted found in part (ii) of the federal definition. It was not Bower's intention for a distinction to be made between emotional disturbance and social maladjustment. The five components of his definition were designed specifically as indicators of social maladjustment (Bower, 1982). (Shatz), therefore SED and social maladjustment can be viewed as synonymous.”

(Shatz SSTA Research Centre Report #94-08)

# **Attempts to Define of Social Maladjustment**

“...a child who has a persistent pattern of violating societal norms with truancy, substance abuse, a perpetual struggle with authority, is easily frustrated, impulsive, and manipulative.” ( Doe v. Board of Education of the State of Connecticut, Oct. 24, 1990)



# Factors Maintaining the Notion of “Social Maladjustment”

- Litigations based on wording in the Federal definition

→ “I would challenge anyone to name one court decision that holds that conduct disordered behavior isn't social maladjustment.”

(Slenkovich, 1992, p.21)

→ “..., I am somewhat uncomfortable, and assume readers are equally uncomfortable, with Skiba and Grizzle's (1991) failure to provide an alternative to the problem they have addressed. They assert that the social maladjustment exclusion does not mean conduct-disordered behavior. What, then, does it mean? An established legal principle is that all language in a statute must be interpreted to have meaning.”

(Slenkovich, 1992, p.23).

→ “...their (Skiba and Grizzle) refusal to give any meaning whatsoever to the term, ‘socially maladjusted,’ is contrary to law.”

(Slenkovich, 1992, p. 43).

## Factors Maintaining the Notion of “Social Maladjustment”

→ “The rebuttal authors -- while denying that social maladjustment means conduct disorder-- never give an alternative definition to those two little words, "social maladjustment." This simply is not permissible in construing a statute; ergo until someone comes up with a better definition of social maladjustment, the only definition we have -- and we have it from three different courts -- is conduct disorder. This is not a terribly complex issue, and does not require reams of papers to debate. It simply is a fact. Congress expressly excluded from the SED definition those students who are socially maladjusted” (Slenkovich, 1992).

Actually, not excluded if they also have SED

# False Assumptions often Related to Social Maladjustment

Olympia, Farley, Christiansen, Peterson, Jenson, and Clark (2004).

Social maladjustment and students with behavioral and emotional disorders: Revisiting basic assumptions and assessment issues.

Psychology in the Schools, 41(8), 835-847.

1. Social maladjustment is equivalent to the psychiatric diagnoses of Conduct Disorder and Oppositional Defiant Disorder.

- *Externalizers vs. Internalizers*
- *Conduct & Oppositional Defiance Disorders vs. Depression & Anxiety*
- *Comorbidity*

# Critical Analysis

→ “Where Slenkovich errs seriously is in her assertion that social maladjustment and conduct disorder are the same. The interpretation introduces a vicious circularity into the definition of serious emotional disturbance. An ability to build or maintain satisfactory relationships, and inappropriate behaviors or feelings under normal circumstances are two of the criteria that qualify a child as seriously emotionally disturbed. Yet the types of behaviors meeting those two criteria may also qualify a student for a DSM diagnosis of conduct disorder. When this diagnosis is then equated with social maladjustment, students who otherwise would be (and have always been) eligible for SED service are suddenly excluded. Thus, Slenkovich's exercise in illogic introduces a legalistic "Catch 22" that effectively nullifies two of the five SED criteria.”

(Skiba and Grizzle, 1992, p. 25)

2. The socially maladjusted child makes a *conscious decision* to behave negatively, whereas the child with serious emotional disturbance acts without forethought.

“In addition Skiba and Grizzle observe that one instrument developed for the specific purpose of discriminating between these two groups (the Differential Test of Conduct and Emotional Problems; Kelly, 1990) attempts to separate SED from conduct disorder (SM) on the basis of the intent of the child's actions as rated by a teacher. However, Skiba and Grizzle found only 2 of 63 items that could be construed as measuring intentionality. One also must question the accuracy with which teachers can judge children's intentions. Neither teachers, psychologists, nor attorneys can see into the minds, much less the souls, of children --their motivation is not accessible through rating scales or DSM III classifications.”

*From Nelson, C. Michael (1992). Searching for meaning in the behavior of antisocial pupils, public school educators, and lawmakers. School Psychology Review, Vol. 21, Issue 1, p35, 5p*

# Assumptions often Related to Social Maladjustment

3. The socially maladjusted child *understands* the consequences or impact of his/her behavior, while the child with serious emotional disturbance fails to appreciate the consequences of their behavior.
4. The socially maladjusted child has the ability to *control* his/her own behavior, while the child with serious emotional disturbance lacks the ability to regulate or inhibit behavior.
  - How are *Choice/Understanding/Ability-to-Control* Measured?
  - Why would it matter?
  - How do we determine *intent*?
  - How are the effects of *intentional* behavior different than *unintentional* behavior?

## Assumptions often Related to Social Maladjustment

5. The socially maladjusted child exhibits *no guilt or remorse* for his/her negative behavior.

- Inference of remorse or lack thereof
- Self-report as a measure of guilt/remorse?
- Guilt/Remorse an issue for ADHD, Autism, ID, LD?

6. The socially maladjusted child exhibits *externalizing* behaviors while the seriously emotionally disturbed child exhibits internalizing behaviors.

- *Externalizing/internalizing* dichotomy does not eliminate SED (Olympia et al., 2004)

# Assumptions often Related to Social Maladjustment

7. The socially maladjusted child is *nondisabled* while the seriously emotionally disturbed child is disabled.

The comorbidity of overlapping conditions such as depression, anxiety, learning problems, and attention deficit disorder is well established for externalizing students assumed to be socially maladjusted (p 839).



# Implications of Social Maladjustment Label

- Delay In Services Can Lead To Increased Risk for Exclusion, Dropout, and Future Problems
- Longitudinal research indicates that antisocial patterns start at a young age and without intervention, continue to escalate for many children

**(Campbell, 1994; Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995)**

# The Logic that Debunks Validity of the Term Social Maladjustment as Distinct from SED/EBD

Assume, as the Judge's rulings described above, that:

- Social Maladjustment is Conduct Disorder

Assume also that:

- Conduct Disorder is SED/EBD

## Conduct Disorder (DSM 5)

### Criteria:

A. A repetitive and persistent pattern of behavior in which the basic rights of others or major age-appropriate societal norms or rules are violated, as manifested by the presence of at least three of the following 15 criteria in the past 12 months from any of the categories below, with at least one criterion present in the past 6 months:

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## **IDEA - FEDERAL DEFINITION**

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(ii) The term includes schizophrenia. The term does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance.

# Transitive Law

If  $A = B$

And  $B = C$

Then  $A = C$

# The Logic that Debunks Validity of the Term Social Maladjustment as Distinct from SED/EBD

Let A = Social Maladjustment

Let B = Conduct Disorder

Let C = SED

Thus, the logical argument is:

- If Social Maladjustment = Conduct Disorder and
- If Conduct Disorder = SED/EBD

Then:

- Social Maladjustment = SED

Then how can we exclude?

# An Analysis of Usage of the Terms *Bully, Bullying* and *Bullies*

# Bullying: Definitions, Intent, Behavior

Definition of Bullying	Key Elements of Intent	Example “Behaviors” given
(A person who) seeks to harm, intimidate, or coerce (someone perceived as vulnerable). <a href="https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/bully">https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/bully</a>	seeks to	



# Bullying: Definitions, Intent, Behavior

Definition of <i>Bullying</i>	Key Elements of Intent	Example “Behaviors” given
“...unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. <a href="http://stopbullying.gov">Stopbullying.gov</a>	“Kids who bully <b>use their power</b> —such as physical strength, access to embarrassing information, or popularity— <b>to</b> control or harm others.”	teasing, name-calling, embarrassing someone in public, taunting, threatening to cause harm

# Bullying: Definitions, Intent, Behavior

Definition of Bullying	Key Elements of Intent	Example behaviors
<p>“...the repetitive, intentional hurting of one person or group by another person or group, where the relationship involves an imbalance of power. It can happen face to face or online</p> <p><a href="http://anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk">anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk</a></p>	<p>“...isolating others, tormenting, hiding books, threatening gestures, ridicule, humiliation, intimidating, excluding, manipulation and coercion.”</p>	<p>pushing poking kicking hitting biting pinching</p>

# Bullying: Definitions, Intent, Behavior

Definition of <i>Bullying</i>	Key Elements of Intent	Example “Behaviors”
<p>“...an ongoing and deliberate misuse of power in relationships through repeated verbal, physical and/or social behaviour that intends to cause physical, social and/or psychological harm. It can involve an individual or a group misusing their power, or perceived power, over one or more persons who feel unable to stop it from happening.”</p> <p><a href="https://www.ncab.org.au/">https://www.ncab.org.au/</a></p>	<p>Intentional and repeated, Covert, Intimidate, Nasty</p>	<p>Physical: hitting, kicking, tripping, pinching, pushing, damaging property.</p> <p>Verbal/Social: name calling, insults, teasing, intimidation, homophobic or racist remarks, or verbal abuse</p>

# Bullying: Definitions, Intent, Behavior

## Definition of *Bullying*

“...an intentional behavior that hurts, harms, or humiliates a student, either physically or emotionally, and can happen while at school, in the community, or online. Those bullying often have more social or physical “power,” while those targeted have difficulty stopping the behavior.”

<https://www.pacer.org/bullying/>

## Key Elements of Intent

“It is intentional, meaning the act is done willfully, knowingly, and with deliberation to hurt or harm.”

## Example “Behaviors”

Overt:  
fighting,  
hitting,  
name calling  
Covert:  
gossiping,  
leaving  
someone out  
on purpose.

# Anticipated Arguments to Support Use of the Terms *Bullying*, *Bully* (noun/verb) and *Bullies* (verb)

## Argument 1:

The term *bullying* merely represents a group of behaviors and the exhibition of those behaviors.

## Rebuttal:

- We already have a nomenclature for challenging behaviors that don't require the terms *bully* or *bullying*. Physical aggression is exemplified by hitting, slapping, punching, pushing, kicking. Examples of verbal aggression include yelling (at someone), name-calling, teasing. These behaviors can be reliably defined by the topography and intensity of the behavior (and content of verbal behavior), and measured without the need of inference to an intent, observation of which is unreliable.

# Anticipated Arguments to Support Use of the Terms *Bullying*, *Bully* (noun/verb) and *Bullies* (verb)

## Argument 2:

The term *bullying* is reserved for those behaviors (e.g., hitting, name-calling) that have *intent* (awareness of purpose) to “control” or “harm,” and which are accompanied by a “lack of remorse/guilt”

## Rebuttal

- Measuring a “lack of remorse” and is difficult to measure, if even possible, whether discussing *social maladjustment* or *bullying* terms
- Such behaviors (i.e., physical/verbal aggression) can be reliably defined and measured without the addition of the construct “intent.”
- “Intentional” adds nothing to identifying a treatment regimen.

Difficulties in measurement of *bullying* behavior develop with the large range of behaviors included, the covert nature of behaviors, the intent to harm, and the differences in power. In order to measure bullying behavior, specific behaviors must be operationally defined and components of intent, power, and frequency must be removed. This change is certainly necessary for effective intervention, but questions can still be drawn regarding the need to group specific behaviors into the “bullying behavior” category rather than view each separately or grouping the topographies into response classes.

(Ross, Horner, & Stiller)

# Anticipated Arguments to Support Use of the Terms *Bullying*, *Bully* (noun/verb) and *Bullies* (verb)

## Argument 3:

The terms *bully* and *bullying* identify a need for intervention and the motivations for the behavior that give direction for that treatment.

## Rebuttal

- The *bullying* terms (and inferred traits/states of intention) add nothing to (a) identifying problematic classes of behavior (e.g., aggression), (b) reliably defining and measuring it's topography and function(s), and determining resultant directions for treatment that is function-based.
- There is a large body of evidence-based practices that identifies the functions of behavior and resultant treatment directions, thus
- The construct of *Bullying* is superfluous



# Functions of Behavior

- The behavior is reinforced by attention (e.g., eye contact, praise, conversation, criticism)
- The behavior is reinforced by tangibles (objects, activities, events)
- The behavior is reinforced by automatic or sensory stimulation (e.g., visual, auditory, olfactory, proprioceptive, Kinesthetic)
- The behavior is reinforced by escape from, or avoidance of, attention or interactions (e.g., aversive social interactions, eye contact, criticism)
- The behavior is reinforced by escape from, or avoidance of, tasks/tangibles (e.g., homework, chores, seatwork)
- The behavior is reinforced by escape from, or avoidance of, automatic (unconditioned) aversive stimuli (those that are presumed to cause pain or discomfort, e.g., sensory discomfort, anxiety)

# Anticipated Arguments to Support Use of the Terms *Bullying*, *Bully* (noun/verb) and *Bullies* (verb)

## Argument 4:

We use the term *bully as a verb* for exhibiting the behaviors that comprise *bullying*, not to label the child.

## Rebuttal:

- “Instead of negatively labeling a student as a bully, victim, perpetrator, or aggressor, the emphasis is on labeling what the student does, for example, name-calling, teasing...verbal aggression...” (Sugai, Horner, & Algozzine, 2011, pg. 2)
- If one is inclined to believe that the term *bully* can be used to describe behavior to the exclusion of contamination of perceptions about a child exhibiting the behavior, ask this question of teachers, counsellors, administrators, and the breadth of service personnel:

What is the term for a student/child/client  
who engages in bullying?

# Interventions Strategies Designed to Increase Prosocial Behavior and Decrease Aggression

- Social Skills Instruction (Modeling; Video-Modeling; ART; Skill Streaming, Walker)
- Differential Reinforcement (DRI, DRA, DRO, DRL, DRH)
- Response Cost

## Interventions Strategies for Recipients of Aggression

- Bystanders (e.g., students, teachers) must be taught to respond to aggression appropriately
- interrupting behaviors must be taught (e.g., “stop/walk/talk,” Ross, Horner, Stiller)
- Students should have multiple opportunities to practice using strategies

(Stiller, Nese, Tomlanovich, Horner, & Ross, 2013)